

By Brian DeVore, *Twin Cities Daily Planet*

My kids reminded me this morning that the final hours of another Minnesota school year are fast approaching. It's amazing how scholars who can barely master adding or subtracting from September to April suddenly learn how to calculate the passing of time down to the microsecond once May and June roll around. This is also the time of year when certain schools across the state are doing some calculations of their own: were efforts during the past several months to get more locally produced food into cafeterias worth the time, expense and general hassle?

The answer to that question will determine if farm to school efforts become not just a series of short-term experiments, but a regular part of institutional cafeterias. A vote for the latter came from the direction of our nation's Capitol last week when the National Farm to School Act of 2010 (H.R. 5456) was introduced by U.S. Representatives Betty McCollum (D-MN), Tom Latham (R-IA) and Bobby Scott (D-VA). The bill has 22 original co-sponsors, including Representatives Keith Ellison (D-MN) and Tim Walz (D-MN).

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A central component of H.R. 5456 is a competitive matching grant program of up to \$100,000 to support planning, implementation, training and technical assistance for communities to implement farm to school programs. The legislation would also direct the USDA to identify existing federal programs that can be used to facilitate participation of small- and medium-sized farmers in farm to school programs. It would create an online exchange so that data on farm to school programs is widely available and good ideas can be shared nationwide.

The timing couldn't be better. Farm to school programs have taken off in Minnesota. An estimated 69 school districts now have programs, which is more than double the number of Minnesota districts with farm to school initiatives in 2008.

But the majority of these initiatives are still in the tentative, experimental phase. I saw one of these efforts firsthand in April while collecting information for a recent Land Stewardship Letter article on farm to school. Tiny (82 students) Ridgeway Community School in rural southeast Minnesota has been sourcing food from some 10 local farmers since September. With the help of government grants, a lot of parent volunteer time, and the foraging skills of LSP organizer Caroline van Schaik, the school has proven that food produced by local farms using sustainable methods can be served in a small cafeteria.

Locally produced food is far from a major presence in the Ridgeway lunchroom. It's estimated that during the 2009-2010 school year the school spent around \$2,000 on local foods out of an approximately \$8,500 budget. But for a relatively modest investment, the school has proven one can make local, sustainably raised food a consistent part of lunch, not just a sampling here and there. A glance at the school menu shows that two to four times a week the phrase "Foods Grown Sustainably by Farmers we KNOW!" appears as a special footnote next to certain items.

Such consistency is critical if kids are to become comfortable with seeing fresh items like spinach or cucumbers as "everyday food," rather than "special occasion food," says van Schaik.

That consistency is also important if farmers are to see schools as reliable customers for their production. Vegetable farmer Sandy Dietz, who was one of Ridgeway's suppliers during the school year, told me recently that selling carrots and other produce to the school was a good way to try out a new marketing option, but some ordering/transportation kinks need to be worked out before it becomes a reliable moneymaker for farms like hers.

Working out the kinks could be well worth it for farmers. As we've reported in this blog before, farmers like Greg Reynolds found selling to a much larger suburban school district like the one in Hopkins to be financially viable right off the bat. "...Hopkins serves 10,000 meals a week. For a local farm, that's a huge market. And that's just one school district," says Reynolds.

Whatever the size or location, all schools dipping their toes in the farm to school waters face similar challenges. Besides transportation logistics, there are outdated government nutrition guidelines, pressure to spend every school minute preparing kids for standardized tests and, the 500 pound guerrilla, tight budgets, to contend with.

As Ridgeway School Director Jodi Dansingburg makes clear in a recent LSP podcast (episode 79), it's not enough for a school to make serving local foods a part of its value system. In Ridgeway's case, school officials and parents see farm to school as not only providing healthier nutrition for kids, but also as a way for "giving back" to the local community - in this case farmers and processors of farm products.

Such sentiments will help Ridgeway stick with farm to school, even when it becomes a bit of a hassle. After all, isn't educating kids in general a bit of a pain?

But good intentions and a strong value system steeped in local, sustainable food can only carry a school so far in the real world. Sometimes it takes a publicly funded push to get them over the initial humps and to spread a good idea nationally. Such a push should be a no-brainer, since feeding kids healthy food and supporting local economies is a public good that will pay dividends to us all far down the line.

The National Farm to School Act of 2010, or something like it, could be just the kind of push that helps farm to school graduate from "nice idea" to cafeteria constant.